

ENFIELD — CAN THEY BE CAUGHT?

CAN Enfield be caught? That's the key question as clubs in the Isthmian League begin their Christmas break this week (writes Stuart Earp).

One can only admire the way Enfield have carved out a 14 point lead at the top of the table and if their current form is anything to go by, there seems little likelihood of the title going anywhere else but Southbury Road. Certainly against Wycombe in October they looked the outstanding side in the league, winning 3-0.

Wanderers followers must be hoping the leaders will 'blow up' in the second half of the season but manager Ted Hardy seems to have such strength in depth in his squad that would cover such an eventuality. Players like Steve King, an expensive signing from Leytonstone, and Nick Glover are vying for places in the forward line.

The situation at Enfield is a marked contrast to Wycombe where the forward line has given manager John Reardon his biggest headaches. Many times this season Wanderers have had 60 to 70 per cent of matches and yet have struggled to find the target.

The void left by Ian Pearson, now playing at Millwall, has not been filled despite the signing of Derek Harris from Southall. Mick Hollifield switched to the front line from midfield with some success but both Harris and Dylan Evans have disappointed at times. Evans in particular has not responded to a regular place in the side and his erratic form does little to help the teamwork. Tony Horseman has done well whenever called upon but 'Bodger' is nearing the end of a long and illustrious career and certainly cannot figure in any long term plans.

Wanderers have also missed a consistent midfield player this season. As with Pearson, no one has ever replaced Terry Reardon as ball winner and creator although Graham Mackenzie is maturing into a similar player. The signing of Roger Day, originally for a one month period, started a minor revival in fortunes but again, Roger is close to the end of his playing career.

Wycombe's defence has served them well so far although there are signs that they can be caught on occasions. Perhaps one of the biggest surprises is the form of Peter Spittle who has established himself as the number one goalkeeper over John Maskell. Peter, who has worked hard on his kicking, has won his place with some consistent performances.

Whether Wycombe are good enough to catch up with Enfield remains to be seen. Personally, I think the leaders are too far in front but football has a habit of making such prediction look foolish.

Much will depend on whether John Reardon can find two top-class replacements for Steve Vass, who leaves for a coaching job in Bahrain this month, and Farouk Quraishi, back with Tampa Bay Rowdies in America.

Taking the first half of the season as a whole, it would appear that the standard of Isthmian football is on the wane. Wycombe certainly are not producing the sort of football that won them four titles in five years but the problem is not just at Loakes Park. Looking at the other teams, only Enfield have maintained the high standard set in recent years.

There could be several reasons for the decline. The top players of five years ago are all getting older — players like Larry Pritchard, Keith Mead, John Butterfield who are all former amateur internationals. Obviously they can't go on for ever and there are not many players capable of taking over.

In these days when instant success is demanded by supporters, clubs have no time to introduce younger players into their teams and there is a dearth of young talent in the Premier Division. Clubs are still hanging onto the older players — but it must be a shortsighted policy.

There is hope, however, for the future. The new Berger Paints Youth Cup which started the season, has unearthed several players of rare promise if the clubs can keep them. Isthmian clubs are under increasing pressure for players from their Football League counterparts but youngsters must be encouraged if the standard of football at this level is to be maintained.

The football fans that Santa Claus forgot

ONCE upon a time when football was spelt with not so many 'fs' one of the highlights of the Christmas holiday used to be the local derbies on December 25 and 26. And in festive mood the fans used to gather for the fun and games, either to work up an appetite for their Christmas pudding or to shake it down after the big meal.

There were paper hats and penalties and perhaps even a few mild punch-ups. But it was all good fun.

Remember how Wycombe Wanderers always made the welkin ring with a Christmas cracker of local derby games with Oxford City? Alas the City have now descended into the lower reaches of the Isthmian League and that derby is no more.

But even if the City were back in the top flight and ready and willing, could such a holiday game now take place? Hardly. Nowadays Wycombe Wanderers come from much farther afield than Amersham, or Marlow or down at the Marsh. And this Christmas some of the lads will be going back up North to spend Christmas with their families.

Another member of the squad has an engagement with that new name in world football Tampa Bay Rowdies in far off Florida, while another is following in the footsteps of English football's erstwhile godfather, Don Revie, to sort out the game in the Middle East. Next year he may be dreaming of a white Christmas, but the best of luck.

So Loakes Park, ancestral home of the Wanderers, will be about as bare at Christmas as the family larder will be on the day after Boxing Day.

And there will be many a heavy heart in Desborough Road, Dashwood Avenue and Downley Common as the soccer starved supporters sigh for the return of their annual feast — the football fans that Santa Claus forgot.

Come to think of it there are probably heavy hearts in Desborough Road, Dashwood Avenue and Downley Common already, because of the cruel fate that has befallen the Wanderers over their fixtures of late.

As the nights of 1977 grew longer the floodlights of Loakes Park should have grown stronger. But have they heck.

They have been as dim as the proverbial service canteen candle as the Wanderers have packed their bags and gone over the hills and far away.

To places like Minehead to get kicked out of the FA Cup. To Leatherhead in the stockbroker belt of Surrey ... to Slough, often a place of despond, footballwise.

Then all quiet on the Loakes Park front for Christmas. Then away to Tooting. Then away again to Bridgend, look you, in the FA Trophy which has never given the Wanderers a home tie. (How Scrooge-like can you get?)

Then off to Slough again. Then on January 28, keep your fingers crossed, home at last, to Hitchin Town.

By then most supporters will probably need a map to find their way to Loakes Park, the players will be practically perfect strangers ... and the band, if they can get one, will play "There's no place like home."

The wizards of football have hardly waved their magic wand over Loakes Park of late. Perhaps they will do better in 1978.

Mind you there is one away fixture the fans would not mind in the New Year, a trip to Wembley in the final of the FA Trophy.

The Wanderers haven't been to that illustrious park since they lost to Bishop Auckland in the old Amateur Cup final. And that will be twenty-one years ago come next April.